CRISIS POINT

January 12, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 61:1-4
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

"...when Jesus also had been baptized...a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work."

-Luke 3:21-23 (NRSV)

Sometimes it takes thirty years. In his new memoir, Deadlines, former New York Times reporter, bureau chief, executive editor, James Reston, describes the youthful naivete and heady optimism of his early life.

And then at thirty he found himself in London during the Blitz, under fierce attack, separated from his wife and new baby, faced for the first time with the possibility of death. He still has the letter he wrote that night in London to his infant son Richard:

> "To your mother I left everything I have, a few dollars, a lot of books, and the memories of a short and happy life. To you, alas, I left nothing..." [see pp. 93-94]

Reston writes that he was glad later his son was too young to read it. But thirty was for him, clearly, a pivotal and important time.

"Jesus was about thirty years old," Luke adds as a postscript to the account of the Baptism, "...about thirty years old when he began his work," to be precise about it.

Father Andrew Greeley's important research into contemporary spirituality shows that "around the age of thirty serious prayer begins for many people." It was reported in Newsweek in a cover article on praying, "...at age thirty, when the illusion that we are masters of our own fate fades adults develop a deeper need to call on the Master of the Universe." [Newsweek, 1/6/92]

And so, at the age of thirty, a young adult from Nazareth stepped into the muddy water of the Jordan River and began his life's work.

There is a major gap in what we know about him. Born in Bethlehem, his mother and father returned to their home in Nazareth shortly thereafter. And other than one solitary incident when he was twelve and they went to Jerusalem for Passover and he became separated from them for three days, we know nothing about the intervening years until he shows up one day on the banks of the Jordan River.

We can speculate about his formative years, of course, on the basis of what we know about his culture. There is some danger to that, obviously, because it is always tempting to take one's own speculations as the probable truth. William Barclay was a beloved Scottish New Testament professor who did a lot of creative speculating, irritating the scholarly community but providing thousands of preachers with lovely, if slightly Scottish sounding, Bible stories.

Speculating on the eighteen year gap in Jesus's life, Barclay is wonderfully imaginative. When they returned to Nazareth after the trip to Bethlehem for the census, they resumed a normal peasant life which, the way Barclay tells it, could well have been in the Western Highlands. Joseph's carpentry shop was in the front, living quarters in back. The little boy would have spent time in both places. He learned to read and write at a village school and attended Synagogue with his parents. As an adolescent he would have learned his father's trade. Joseph is never heard from again, so the assumption is that he died and that Jesus continued the business. Mark names three brothers and sisters, so Barclay speculates that Jesus was supporting his family after Joseph died and that when he was thirty, his younger brothers were ready to take over. In a particularly fanciful but lovely bit of speculation, Barclay cites an ancient legend that Jesus specialized in making yokes for oxen, and that one of these yokes was placed outside his shop as an advertisement along with the sign - "My yokes fit well." So when he used that figure of speech later, people recognized its source.

Could be. What we do know is that something important happens to people around thirty and that when he was thirty he showed up one day in a crowd of people who had come to the Jordan River to hear a strange preacher by the name of John. John was a member of a desert community apparently, perhaps the Essenes whose Dead Sea monastery has been excavated. They were ascetic, highly disciplined, celibate, and the Romans were very suspicious of them. John fits the type. His preaching reminded people of their national heroes - the prophets. He stirred people with his references to the ancient traditions, their unique relationship to God, the privileges and the responsibilities which attended

their role. When they stepped into the water to be baptized, they were affirming in a deep and profound way their Jewishness; they were claiming their identity, and they were silently but eloquently saying that they were not Roman subjects, that Roman authority was illegitimate in this land God had given them. I imagine for them it was a moment of high patriotism.

Perhaps there were Roman officials, or soldiers too, watching, remembering who among them had stepped into the water. They continued to hound John. Their puppet, Herod Antipas, had him imprisoned and finally executed.

John was the one who inspired Jesus to step forward and commit his life. It was John who inspired Jesus of Nazareth to begin his true vocation.

What did it mean for Jesus? What was he doing there in the crowd that day, listening to John preach? Perhaps he was free of his responsibility of caring for his family, free to do what he wanted to do. Perhaps he was restless, bored. Perhaps, as Andrew Greeley suggests, he was thinking about the meaning of his life and what he really believed and perhaps he was doing some serious praying.

Walter Burghardt, a Jesuit who teaches at Georgetown, has written a book on the Seasons of Life and suggests that the summer of life, the midsection, where most of us are, even if we have to be a little flexible with the outward perimeters, is when we make the major choices which define our place in the world and our identity - who we will be. Burghardt and others help us to understand that while we may make occupational decisions, where to go to work and relational decisions, who to hook up with, long before - perhaps in our 20s or even our teen years - these decisions about place in the world and personal identity actually come later, beginning around thirty, and in some sense continuing for the rest of our lives. [Seasons That Laugh or Weep, Musings on the Human Journey, p. 33 ff.]

The sequence, to use Jesus as an example, is crisis - deciding to leave routine and security and go out to hear what's going on at the River; experience - for Jesus, the act of baptism; decision - the commitment to a new ideal, a larger vision and the courage to follow it; and finally grace - the word of affirmation. "You are my son, my daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

It is a critical sequence - and social scientists are telling us, given the peculiarities of our time and place, not at all a simple or easy sequence.

For one thing, we don't have a lot of latitude from the age of thirty on. Thirty means really digging into one's career,

having babies and parenting young children. For M.D.'s and J.D.'s, M.B.A.'s and Ph.D.'s, thirty means that the accumulated bills of a decade of higher education must be paid so it's time to generate serious income. From the perspective of just twenty years or so it's hard to remember what you felt like at thirty - primarily because you were too busy earning, paying bills, raising children, to feel much of anything but exhaustion. So sometimes this important deepening which results in our knowing who we are and what we are about is pushed aside simply because we are too busy to attend to it.

Furthermore, there are major societal factors that mitigate against this creative sequence.

A University of Pennsylvania psychologist, Martin Seligman, analyzes the epidemic of depression in our culture. He writes, "Since World War II, depression has been on the rise. Young persons are ten times likelier to suffer severe depression than their grandparents." [Learned Optimism, p. 282]

The reason, Dr. Seligman proposes, is that we have experienced "the waxing of the self and the waning of the community." The solitary self, he argues, has more power and authority to make decisions than ever before. A trip to the drugstore can become a psychological trauma simply because you have so many choices. Have you purchased cough drops lately, or cold tablets? The options are enormous, row upon row, shelf on top of shelf - there are literally hundreds of alternatives. You can have an attack of acute anxiety standing in the aisle at Walgreens trying to decide. No wonder we get depressed.

More seriously, the emergence of the self has prompted rising expectations for self-satisfaction, gratification and meaning immediately, not some time in the future when the ship comes in, but now. A job is no longer simply the way to generate income; it must produce meaning for life. Marriage, Seligman observes, is not just for producing the next generation. "Our mate today must be eternally sexy, and thin, and interesting to talk to, and good at tennis." [p. 283]

"Maximal self," Seligman calls us. "The modern individual is not the peasant of yore with a fixed future yawning ahead. He or she is a frantic trading floor of options, decisions and preferences." The result is depression and a loss of community and a decrease in commitment to the common good - "the waning of the community."

There is, I believe, something stirring in our culture. We are beginning to understand these dynamics. Perhaps we've experienced the depression which results from being a "maximal self." Perhaps we discovered that life committed to nothing larger than itself is pretty meager. Perhaps it is simply a sense that I

have one life to live and it is a matter of critical importance to me to use it for some purpose other than my own amusement.

Newsweek said, "In allegedly rootless, materialistic, self-centered America, there is also a hunger for a personal experience of God that prayer seems to satisfy."

Jesus went to the Jordan River one day, left the routine of carpentry and decided to give his life to God - which was his vocation. Dr. Seligman teaches his students and counsels his clients to be deliberate about it. He observes that many of us are willing to endure the physical discomfort of strenuous calisthenics because we know we will be healthier for it. So he prescribes moral or spiritual "jogging." [p. 287]

Give away five per-cent of your income he recommends, not because he's a fund raiser or head of a church stewardship campaign, but because you'll be healthier, happier and less depressed.

The next time a homeless person asks for money, stop and talk for a few minutes and then do something outrageous - give the person five dollars. There are, that is to say, ways each one of us can put ourselves in a place to hear a word about the purpose of our lives. It may not mean changing jobs at all. In fact, it may mean a sense of confirmation that what we are doing is what we ought to be doing. The important thing is to go to the river and to listen and then to act.

Part of what Jesus did during that period of time between the age of twelve and thirty was what all of us do, namely get ready for the rest of our lives; wait for, wonder about, struggle with the options, experiment with and generally try to identify the purpose of our being here - our vocation, our calling. That task is rarely finalized. Rather there is a tantalizing sense in which we are always in the process of deciding what we will be when we grow up.

It may be why we are here this morning - like Jesus standing on the bank of the river, waiting to hear a word that will help us know what to do with our lives.

Jesus responded to the word he heard by stepping into the water. For him that act meant opening himself to God, to God's purpose for his life. And so I presume to invite you - to step in, to do what you must do, to open your life to God, to give yourself to God's purpose, to commit your life to some purpose larger than your own security and amusement, to give your life - and in the giving to become who God wants you to be.

Dag Hammarskjold's diary entry for Whitsunday, 1961, captures the sense of it, and over the years has reminded me of the

responsibility each of us has to say "yes" to our own lives and to put them to work for purposes which are important. Hammarskjold wrote:

> "I don't know who - or what - put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone - or Something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. From that moment I have known what it means 'not to look back' and 'to take no thought for the morrow.'" [Markings, p. 205]

There are some risks. A few months after he wrote that, Hammarskjold died in an air crash while flying to negotiate a United Nations cease fire in Africa. Three years after Jesus stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized, he was crucified.

It may be safer to stay put, not to say yes, not to step forward. It will certainly be less exhilarating, less exciting, less alive.

Hammarskjold felt that his life had meaning and purpose - after he said "yes." And Jesus, when the waters of baptism flowed down over his head, heard a voice - No one else heard it, by the way. But the sense of it is that the voice was for him and it said something he had not known or heard before. The voice said:

> "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

After the crisis - affirmation; after the decision - unconditional love.

It is the word we want to hear and need to hear.

So today, in your heart of hearts - take a step; say "Yes" to your life - give it to God, and hear God say:

> "You are my daughter -
>
> "You are my son. The beloved.
>
> "With you I am well pleased."

Amen.